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Lawson Hill Goes Green to Tackle Spruce Budworm Problem

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SWEET SOLUTION – John Buerger, owner of Alpha Natural, Inc., threw handfuls of an all-natural, non-toxic treatment that both fertilizes the soil and make the trees unpalatable to pests like the Spruce Budworm. (Photo by Dale Kondracki)

TELLURIDE – John Buerger’s crew trample through spruce budworm-infected trees bordering Lawson Hill’s ball fields, carrying buckets filled with white powder. Each tree they come upon gets the same treatment – a few handfuls of powder thrown onto the ground immediately surrounding the trunk.

They don’t wear protective clothing or masks, just some work gloves and sturdy boots. At first glance, the scene could seem alarming, assuming that the white powder blanketing the ground is a toxic insecticide.

Yet Buerger, owner of Alpha Natural, Inc. in New Castle, Colo., assures me the white powder his workers are sprinkling across the landscape is both non-chemical and non-toxic. He also assures me that, although the substance is not an insecticide, it will help protect these trees from future damage caused by the insidious spruce budworm and other pests who threaten the health of the forest.

It seems almost too good to be true: An all-natural, non-toxic treatment (safe enough to apply around pets and children) that will both fertilize the soil and make the trees unpalatable to pests. Lawson Hill Home Owner’s Association member Pam Hall was on the committee that hired Buerger to treat the community’s trees, many of which have been stressed by the spruce budworm. She explains that a committee researched many different options and Alpha Natural emerged far ahead of the rest as the best and most effective method for dealing with the area’s spruce budworm infestation.

“Being a neighborhood, with pets and kids and water nearby, we felt it simply wouldn’t be socially acceptable [to spray insecticides.] We felt lucky to find Alpha Natural; everyone on the board really thought it made sense,” Hall says.

As his crew make their way through the trees of lower Lawson Hill, Buerger explains that the treatment both amends the soil and deters pests, helping save the trees in a vulnerable forest. He says it is soil depletion that has contributed to the large numbers of trees dying in Colorado’s forests, most notably from bark beetle infestations. Impacts of development have disrupted the landscape, compounding pollutants in the soil and leading to a decline in valuable microorganisms, which are essential for digesting and distributing nutrients to vegetation. Elements naturally found in the soil get out of balance, causing – in the case of Lawson Hill – an abundance of iron, lead, and zinc, but likely not enough phosphorous.

Phosphorous is an important element for plant health, because it is responsible for increasing a plant’s Brix value, which by definition is the sucrose or sugar content of a plant. The higher the Brix value, the healthier the plant. Feeding the soil with a natural fertilizer blend counteracts the dominant elements found in the soil, effectively jump-starting the microbe activity. More nutrients – specifically sugars – are formed, leading not only to healthier individual plants but to a more robust forest ecosystem.

This is where Buerger’s white powder – a pest control in disguise – comes in.

Alpha Naturals fertilizer blends use all-natural ingredients obtained from different carbon sources, in essence sweetening the soil and thus increasing plants’ Brix value. Many insects that have become forest problems, like Tent Caterpillars and Spruce Budworms, cannot digest large amounts of sugars (because they don’t have livers.) Thus, trees treated with Buerger’s powder become less appetizing to liver-less pests, encouraging them to move on to less-sweet pastures.

This quick and dirty lesson in plant botany comes from a man who has spent his entire life studying plants. Growing up on farms and ranches in Colorado, Buerger has spent much of his adult life “chasing weeds.” He says he realized early on that the “new, miracle” herbicides weren’t all they were cracked up to be. A few years spent as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid 1970s, working in Costa Rica and Ecuador with farmers who didn’t have access to chemical herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, taught Buerger more natural methods of weed and pest control.

After returning to Colorado, he began applying his new knowledge to weed control. “I really wanted to make an impact, rather than just spraying toxic chemicals into the environment every year.” Thus emerged his company Alpha Naturals, now in its 13 year. The company has evolved from providing just weed control to offering all-natural, non-toxic insect and even bear control, through methods very similar to those Buerger was using last week to help control the Lawson Hill Spruce Budworm problem. While he has provided services to communities all over the Western Slope, his contract with the Lawson Hill HOA is his largest project so far.

Lawson Hill homeowner Hall says the neighborhood HOA began discussing the issue of tree health after a number of homeowners started noticing Spruce Budworm infestations in trees in their backyards last spring. The threat of losing the community’s trees to this and other insects (the Spruce Budworm has not traditionally caused as much forest damage as the Pine Beetle, but forests already stressed by one pest

become easy targets for others, Buerger says,) pushed the Lawson Hill community into action.

“We do not feel like we can afford to lose our trees for a few reasons – property values are one, but the increasing fire hazard is also a concern. The cost to remove dead trees from our forest on steep hillsides is massive. Although the cost to fertilize trees is significant, it is by far much less than dead tree removal,” Hall explains, noting that the Lawson Hill HOA chose to complete the project with Alpha Naturals using funds from unused 2009 budget line items.

“We feel Lawson Hill is stepping up to tackle a major problem,” she says, pointing to the destruction already caused in other parts of the state by pests like the Bark Beetle. “We hope to be ahead of the curve and feel our trees are worth the effort.”

Buerger and his crew treated all the native trees found in residential areas of Lawson Hill last week, as well as most of the rest of the trees surrounding those neighborhoods. He says that although the affects of the treatment will be gradual (unlike a quick, heavy dose of insecticide,) Lawson Hill residents should begin to see improvement by next spring.